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ABSTRACT

Several traditional attitudes of guidance counselors and teachers concerning vocational opportunities available to language students are seen as being no longer viable in the light of society's rapidly changing vocational demands. Language students are urged not to consider teaching as a source of certain employment, particularly in view of the decline in enrollment in existing language programs. Other traditional sources of employment are equally placed in doubt. Three guiding questions are formulated to help the student determine his real interest in learning a foreign language: (1) What type of adult role does the student envision for himself?; (2) What most interests the student in foreign language study?; and (3) How much does the language student plan to use his language skills? The answers to these questions will help determine the vocational opportunities available to language students. (RL)

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"What Can I Do With It?"

Vocational Counseling for Language Students

Along with parents and professional guidance personnel, teachers and professors have often been willing advisors to young people in search of their life's work. This is true of foreign language instructors as well as those in other subject areas. Usually the inquiry arises from the student's need to identify a career slot for himself that is potentially satisfying materially, emotionally and intellectually, along with the recognition that he has some talent, skill or aptitude for foreign language study. Since it is the teacher who has shown him the aptitude, he assumes that she knows best what future use might be made of his abilities.

In the past, teachers have answered in two major ways: an apology on behalf of teaching as a career with many advantages of which the average student might be ignorant; or, a brief commentary on a few other jobs involving foreign language skills --- bilingual secretarial posts, translating, interpreting at the U.N., foreign service, business opportunities in export-import trade.

The student may be persuaded by this dialogue with his teacher and by a heavy investment in language courses to pursue a career in teaching: it may seem to be the wisest way to maximize his expenditure of energy and resources, or it may appear to be the best choice from a very restricted range. Yet, it may not be in his best interests to go into public school teaching for several reasons.

First of all, recent economic developments in the United States, coupled with the near-demise of NDEA supports to foreign language study and the ebbing of public xenophiliac tendencies (with the possible exception of the current vogue in Chinese) have produced an ear in which high

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school teaching jobs are not available for many certified graduates. Furthermore, university teaching assistantships (which might have offered a temporary haven for those who decide to acquire a Master's Degree because they are unable to obtain full-time positions in the public schools) are also being curtailed through the falling off of university language requirements and high enrollments requiring the services of many teaching assistants. Therefore, to advise teaching as a career may mean leading the student into a dead end, since a job may not exist for the graduate after his training is complete.

A second difficulty concerns the more advanced student who may be seriously deceived in terms of his expectations and the realities he may find upon returning to the high school after four or five years of teacher preparation (should he find such a job). In his classes he has been a member of a social community of his peers and professors, living among many persons with the same enjoyment and interest in foreign languages. Never has he had to go far to find young people with whom he is compatible, and with whom stimulating discussion of his narrow subject matter is both easy and fresh. In contrast to this, when he enters the teaching profession, he may find hemself relatively alone in his school, the only member of the faculty teaching his particular foreign language, and perhaps the only person in his community who is a speaker and reader of foreign materials. Also, and perhaps more important, in college he has been successful at learning; now he is expected to succeed at teaching. The reward system is entirely different for the teacher from what it is for the learner, and, as many principals entrusted with teacher hiring are quick to conclude, the best learners may not make the best teachers. Still another expectation gap comes from the type of study he may have pursued in the university: his interest may have been caught by the literature and philosophical ideas

of the great minds of French, Hispanic, or Germanic culture, whereas he is quickly called as a teacher to instruct pupils in language skills which his training may not have stressed or which his university may have subtly down-graded in status. It is quite possible, therefore, that the student who believes he has been called to be a teacher is only anticipating a perpetuation of his college learning community and its priorities, which may not coincide with the world of the classroom into which he is moving.

Because of these possible disappointments, it is well to consider the alternatives to teaching. What about those business or government posts? Although the U.N. and United States Foreign Service, the translating and interpreting jobs, and the international business careers do involve foreign language skills, they are by no means the wisest avenues for foreign language specialists. The U.N. quota system, the importance of economics, history, and political science in qualifying for foreign service appointments, the low compensation scale for American translators and interpreters, and the corporate or family business structure all constitute real or imagined obstacles or detours in the path of the foreign language student who is contemplating these areas as a life work.[1]

It is clear that in the 1970's, for many reasons, the teacher may need some guidelines to lead the student's thinking about the role of languages in his future. A simple set of three questions may be helpful in finding productive and satisfying directions.

Question 1. Without emphasizing your language aptitude, what type of adult role do you envision for yourself?

The answer to this first question depends largely on the range of vocational possibilities the student has encountered, perferably in real life, but more likely through media such as television, magazines, or newspapers.

Does he see himself as a professional, a business man or woman, a tradesman? Would he prefer working with people or working with machines? Does he imagine a life style where he is home or self-employed? Would he be likely to live and work according to the bidding of an employer, or in a certain region, and how closely will his work be related to the work and life patterns of his family? At this point, both teacher and student may realize that the limited experience of the student is a major source of his dilemma. He may well be wanting to ask what "good" languages serve, what they are "worth" in dollar terms, what they do for his life credentials. Before he can consider the variety of opportunities foreign language study opens to him, he needs to answer a second question, again about himself.

Question 2. What turns you on the most in foreign language study or experience?

The first and second query might reveal a strong desire to travel, or to communicate with others, or simply the satisfaction obtained by a high achiever who feels attracted to foreign languages because of the sense of accomplishment derived from a subject whose methodology is performance and drill dominated. A life role as a language learner, proceeding from one highly successful exercise set to another, is not particularly likely, but an aptitude for exercise completion may come from personality traits which can be essential to other existing life styles. Does the student like the classroom atmosphere of discussion and expression. Does he find foreign culture and literature intersting? Does he focus most strongly on his performance success or excellence? The teacher needs to show him that his class activities need translating for the adult career world, and he must be careful to lose as little as possible in the translation.

Question 3. How much would you like to use the language you are studying, in your adult life? All the time, part time, or as a leisure activity?

The youngster who desires seriously to use a foreign language all the time must realize that he will then need to live in a community of adult foreign-language speakers. As America moves toward Spanish-English bilingualism, and as ethnic identities grow more pronounced and overt, this may not be the idle dream for America it once was, but it also may mean emigration and a vocational choice in an area other than language arts. The amount of time-use of the language dependson where the adult lives and the people with whom he interacts on a daily basis, not his career choice.

Translation and interpreting are special skills of the language professional; the meager pay scales and the extremely high standards of proficiency make these posts rarely attractive or available to Americans. Teaching English abroad remains, however, an excellent area of specialization, with responsible postions open to very young Americans. The teacher of English in a foreign country usually has much more freedom in methodology than he will have at home, and he generally sees thrilling results from his hard work. Foreign motivation to learn English is high, the students do not always consider the subject a luxury or diversion, and some social prestige may even accrue to such positions.

Part time use of foreign languages also depends strongly on social environment, life style, and career choice. There are ample illustrations in our folklore of the business man whose company suddenly notices his foreign language skill and offers him a glamorous opportunity for great and rapid advancement and travel; we usually fail to emphasize that he was a competant company professional first and that there are many more instances

of businessmen who must acquire a second, third or fourth language suddenly and in response to a specific foreign development. For these persons language sensitivity and motivation is more important than any precise earlier training in a given language. There are other circumstances where part time language use is essential.

In America today, no urban teacher, police officer, nurse, legal advisor, bank clerk, independant merchant or social services employee should consider himself ready to walk unless he knows urban, North American Spanish for day-to-day communication. And his language use should be such that he does not make the persons with whom he interacts uneasy or uncomfortable.

The federal government and libraries have always employed persons with foreign language competency. Currently a few good positions are available for oriental acquisitions specialists in large libraries: the crucial skill is a reading knowledge of several oriental languages, principally Japanese and Chinese, in addition to training as a librarian. Though specific language knowledge is essential for that particular job, other factors are so important as to make the actual language use part time: the employee is a professional librarian, willing and able to live near the library in question, and needing only to recognize and comprehend written language.

The growing network of commercial and cultural ties with the Far East makes a knowledge of Japanese or Chinese a potentially useful adjunct skill, in addition to a vocation or career.

For many Americans, foreign languages become a real asset in terms of leisure time. Not only are they the single most important tool for enriching foreign travel, an ever growing recreational activity, but the related interests in cuisine, art or music, folkways home decoration of a particular people are yet another source of personal development after work, at home.

It may seem unreal to a young teenager to contemplate retirement, but increasing numbers of Americans are finding that their income, desire for a less hurried life, and physical need for the moderate sunny climate take them to Mexico, to Italy, or to Spain for the later years of their life, and a residual or casual acquaintance with the language of the country in question represents an incalculable plus in terms of daily happiness. The high school and college student acquires many skills in his intellectual savings bank, to be drawn on in the future. Foreign language study can be such an asset. Not everyone who enjoys skiing skis for a living; some of the most devoted are amateurs who take to the slopes for a few precious weekends carefully earned each year. So too with languages --- as the skier keeps his muscle tone with exercise at home, the language speaker keeps his skill active and then takes off for holidays he has planned with care and the anticipation of the connaisseur. To have language ability and expertise upon which to call in the future, the student needs far more study than the normal one or two years. The adult who seriously drilled for five or even six years of high school and college is the one who will be able to activate and enjoy using a foreign tongue. This is not the dilettante student who experiments with a year or two of study, but rather the committed, the good language learner. He must not be dismayed to realize that though his career may not be languages, his time is <u>well</u> spent developing foreign language skills to a high level of competency.

It seems clear, from the above discussion, that:

1. Public school teaching may not be a viable or a good career choice.
2. the conventional (may we say, mythological) list of language careers may also be poor choices for most young Americans.
3. the student needs to know himself and his interests, both what attracts him to language study and what roles he expects in his future.

To complete the picture, there are some unexpected hopes emerging for the future. Ours is a society of change, and new careers emerge year after year. A surgeon recently informed me that most of the procedures he follows were developed in the past ten years; similarly, new jobs arise, and some if not many of these will involve foreign language skills, or general ability in the area of communication and language arts. Provided our students are reminded constantly that they need to be flexible and open to new avenues of work, they will find interesting, language-related jobs in the future. Secondly, society is becoming more skill-directed and less degree-directed. Therefore the young person is well advised to increase the numbers of skills he can acquire --- mathematics, language, computer programming, and others. Third, vocational training by government, industry, and other institutions of our society is increasingly handled outside of the college classroom. On-the-job training, available as the first stage of permanent employment may free some students for liberal arts study in high school and university.

What can I do with it? Anything and everything. Language teachers need to follow the lead of mathematicians and promote foreign language study as the useful social and intellectual tool it is and it will be. Surely no algebra or geometry or new math student expects to earn his living by solving equations, but unquestioning generations of parents and pupils acknowledge the need for such study. This is the direction we need to take for the brighter future of language teaching as well as language learning and usage.

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NOTES

1. There are two fine publications, one available now and a second in preparation, discussing the precise relation between specific foreign languages and a variety of careers. They are essential for the high school or university teacher's bookshelf, and for student reading collections:

Angelo Cohn, Careers with Foreign Languages. New York: Henry Z. Walck Inc., 1963.

MLA Report, "Foreign Languages in Careers", Scheduled for publication 1973.